

USAID / Bangladesh

The Democracy Partnership: A Success Story

Throughout the decades since independence, many NGOs developed strong roots in the community, but NGO activities did not engage local government. Due to the lack of transparency, community members did not know much about local elected body (LEB) activities and did not participate in local decision making. Given perceptions of an entrenched power structure, most community members did not feel they could have any influence on allocation of resources or governance at the local level. In addition, most citizens did not know they had a right to run in local elections and others were deterred by election violence, as roughly 200 people had been killed in the previous election.

Over the last five years USAID funded a Democracy Partnership through The Asia Foundation involving a total of 105 NGOs conducting democracy activities in approximately 1200 of the country's 4000 Unions. This was the first donor-funded package democracy program in Bangladesh and it introduced numerous NGOs to democracy issues in such areas as elections, improving local elected bodies, and alternative dispute resolution.

Recently The Asia Foundation conducted a series of interviews with senior executives of NGO partners, who were asked about the long term impacts of their participation in Democracy Partnership programs. Interviews were held with leaders of Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha, CARE Bangladesh, International Voluntary Services, RDRS Bangladesh, and Samata. These leaders report that The Democracy Partnership has had significant and lasting impacts on the way many NGOs in Bangladesh approach their grassroots work. The previous pessimism has been replaced by confidence and they now consider local governance to be an integral and essential part of their program.

As a result of DP interventions, citizens are more aware of their rights, better able to articulate their demands, and more confident about interacting with local government officials. Citizens are equipped with better information about women's rights and discrimination. Success in securing rights, services, and seats on union councils has shown people that working together can be a new source of power. At least two NGOs interviewed (RDRS and CARE) report that citizen groups are now working more closely with LEBs. Union Parishad members are invited to community meetings to share information and learn more about community priorities. Constituents are motivated to continue their pursuit of rights, government services, and participation in local decision making, and NGOs have developed new strategies for improving local governance.

All NGOs interviewed believe that the number of seats contested and won by the underprivileged will increase dramatically in the next election. The large number of seats won by NGO-supported candidates in the 1997 election has encouraged more people to think about running in the next election and has convinced others to support and vote for one of their own to represent them in local office. Running for local elected office required candidates to expand their networks and solicit broad support from the constituency by taking on leadership positions in community organizations, and identifying and championing issues of importance to the local community. Simultaneously, the program has inspired several democracy coalitions/networks and has advanced techniques used locally in several areas of governance and human rights. All of these new trends will persist, with continued support from NGOs and will provide a fertile ground for the expanded and more focused efforts planned under the new SO 9 Strengthened Institutions of Democracy.